

CCC INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL CLEMENCE

Date: September 23, 2002

Location: Clinton, Iowa

Interviewer: Larry Wilson

DNR: What camps were you assigned too?

Mike: Camp Bootlake. Townsend, Wisconsin. Then I was transferred to My Camp Cavour. It's up in Leona, Wisconsin. Then I was transferred to the headquarters at Sparta, Wisconsin. It was the district headquarters for the state of Wisconsin and three northern counties of Illinois. I went in July 17, 1936. I got out April 22, 1939.

DNR: Where was your hometown?

Mike: Stockbridge, Wisconsin. I was 16 ½ when I joined.

DNR: What did you do before you joined the CCC's?

Mike: I picked sugar beets.

DNR: Why did you join the CCC's?

Mike: My brother joined in June. I decided I would go to. The only work we had was working in the beet fields. In the winter, we would see if we could get work from the farmers. It was hard.

DNR: How far was the camp from your town?

Mike: About 150 miles. I signed up in Chilton, Wisconsin.

DNR: What was your first day in camp like?

Mike: First day, they assigned us to the barracks, and then they gave us our clothes, orientation. The next day we got our inoculations.

DNR: How were you assigned to the barracks?

Mike: There were eight barracks. I got assigned to barracks number two. Each barracks had about 50 guys. They issued us government issued bedding. The barracks were wooden.

DNR: Were there any personal items you could not bring?

Mike: They had us send everything home.

DNR: Can you remember any of your bunkmates?

Mike: Yes. But I can't remember their names.

DNR: Did you get along with your bunkmates?

Mike: Pretty good. Not an ounce of trouble.

DNR: How was the food?

Mike: We always had good food.

DNR: Who did the cooking?

Mike: They had an enlisted person making the food. Vets from WWI were in the kitchen.

DNR: Any special meals on holidays?

Mike: No. Something decorated. But the meals were always good.

DNR: When did you get paid?

Mike: End of the month. I got \$5. \$25 went home. Paid in cash.

DNR: What did you do on your days off?

Mike: We had a rec hall. We could go into town and bowl. We had Saturdays and Sundays off unless you were on KP.

DNR: Was the Sabbath observed?

Mike: Service was held at the camp in the rec room.

DNR: Did they sell beer at the camp?

Mike: No.

DNR: Were there sports?

Mike: Yes. We played other teams. We played baseball. I played third base.

DNR: Any conflicts while in the camp?

Mike: No.

DNR: Any discipline problems in the camp?

Mike: No. We had one fella who didn't want to take a bath. So they put all his clothes in a bath tub.

DNR: Were those camps offering educational or vocational training?

Mike: Yes. I learned mechanical skills in regards to trucks. The government leased tobacco warehouses. That's where they assigned the trailers and trucks. The trips on the road would take two to three days. This is what I did at Sparta. Then we got assigned to the downtown garage in Sparta. I was the parts manager. I drove an ambulance. I drove a doctor and a veterinarian to Albert Lee. We would stay over night. The other one went to different districts. He would go to different camps. He would inspect the camps and then we would come back to Sparta. He was inspecting for cleanliness of the camps. We picked up one guy with a broken leg and took him to Fort Sheridan. I was in Sparta for 14 months. I ended it there.

DNR: What kind of mechanical training did you get?

Mike: I got it at Sparta. When I got married we went out to Hollywood on our honeymoon and we like it so much we stayed, and I studied machinist work. Then we moved to Detroit. I worked at a company as an inspector. I was also assigned to a Rolls Royce engine cell, working on aircraft engines for P50 fighter planes. In the

Navy I worked as an aircraft engine instructor on Pratt/Whitney and Wright engines. These were fourteen cylinder radial engines.

DNR: Did you stay in contact with anyone?

Mike: No. They were from everywhere.

DNR: Did everyone get along in the work environment?

Mike: Yes. Everyday they posted our jobs on the roster on the bulletin board. At 7:00 a.m. we saluted the flag, got our work assignments and went to breakfast. At Boot Lake camp I drove truck number three. We lined up our trucks on the parade ground every morning. At Cavour, I was there only three months. We were building roads and doing forestry work.

DNR: At Sparta, things got better?

Mike: Yes. I drove a work truck. I transported the work crews and I connected our field phone to the fire tower to let us know if there was a fire. Forest fires would start from the engines. Some of the fires would get out of hand for three or four days. Both camps did forestry and building roads and fire fighting.

DNR: Did you use any special equipment on the job?

Mike: We had a shaft with a wedge on the end of it and you used it to plant trees. I did some carpentry work. I would dig the garbage pit, which was four feet deep and fifteen feet long. We would whitewash the buildings too.

DNR: Were there any minorities in the camp?

Mike: I don't remember. Probably Indians in there though.

DNR: Were you ever injured at work?

Mike: No.

DNR: Was there injuries to others?

Mike: Yes. But I don't remember all them. The serious injuries went to Fort Sheridan. The less serious were handled right there.

DNR: Were there any diseases in the camp?

Mike: No.

DNR: Was there a rodent or insect problem?

Mike: No.

DNR: Did you do any work for the community?

Mike: No.

DNR: Did you have any contact with the community?

Mike: No.

DNR: Did you have any contacts with the females?

Mike: Some of the local girls. During the summer months a lot of soldiers were there.

DNR: Were there problems with the local boys?

Mike: No.

DNR: Did the local community look favorably on the CCC camp?

Mike: Yes. We were accepted.

DNR: Do you have one memorable experience?

Mike: We were fighting a fire near Camp Blackwell, Wisconsin, and the fire was deep down in the forest. We had loaded everything onto railroad cars to take to the fire. Someone flipped a switch to start the train, and we were going in the wrong way. They couldn't stop the train, so we had to jump. No accidents.

DNR: What was your biggest accomplishment at the camp?

Mike: Growing up. Discipline.

DNR: When you got out of the CCC's you went to the navy?

Mike: I was in 34 months. I moved to see my sister in Evanston, Illinois. I got a job working in the country club in the locker room. I met my wife in the office there, where she worked. We got married January 3, 1940. We moved to North Hollywood, California. We stayed until May 1940. In May 1941 we moved to Detroit. We were building engines for the PT Boats and Rolls Royce engines. I stayed there until May of 1943. I took a Navy test and they made me a Tech 2, not a Tech 1 because I was too young. My unit was based out of New York City. I became an instructor. I was an instructor for almost 14 months. Then they sent me to North Carolina to train a crew. I was there for eight weeks on engines. From there, to California for ten days. Then Shoemaker, north of San Francisco, to get our shots and then to Treasure Island. We loaded onto the Gillian for Hawaii. I couldn't get any liberty. We went to the South Pacific, painted buildings. Then I was in charge of a squadron of airplanes. I got out in January of '46. I came home. I got a job for the railroad. I was a switcher for 30 days. I was married with two children and it was not enough. So I got a job working as a mechanic until 1953, I was the shop foremen. I took over the Sinclair Agency as a marketing agent. I did that for 11 years. In 1964, I went into the bottling business. Then I sold that after three years. I worked for another company, Duchossois Industries, 15 years. They sold Whirlpools, GE, and refrigerator shelving. I was a quality control supervisor. I did about three years in the CCC's.

END OF TRANSCRIPTION – SAM J. HAIM – SCRIBE

Updated by Larry Wilson after review with Mike on July 18, 2005.